

SCULPTOR OF SCRAP

Ann Carrington has made her name creating sculpture from 'rubbish' in a shared studio that is home to some of Britain's hottest artists.

Elspeth Thompson reports.
Photograph by Tim roffe

Stepping into Wharf Road Studios is like entering a crazy, post-apocalyptic version of the Natural History Museum. Six larger-than-life horses dominate the cavernous space, their taut muscles, tossing manes and hairy hooves constructed entirely from coconut shells. Naked giants fashioned from slices of galvanised metal swing on chains from the ceiling, or strain to climb a rope hung high in the rafters. A scaly brown alligator is splayed across one wall, while in the next-door room a human figure in charred clothes sits in a chair like a burned-out guy from a forgotten fireworks night.

The atmosphere might be sinister, were it not for the fact that most of the pieces are weirdly beautiful and display a wry sense of humour. Look closely at the alligator for instance, and you'll see that its scales are overlapping leather



Her huge coconut horses, arranged in flamenco poses, are not for sale

shoe uppers; the coconut horses are in flamenco postures, a reference to the castanet ‘clip-clop’ noise made by the shells, and a row of skeletons made from old kitchen chairs – a domesticated version of the Mexican Day of the Dead. Wharf Road Studios is home to some of the hottest new names on the British art scene. A group of them took over the former upholstery factory by a canal in Islington five years ago, having shared a working space since graduating from art colleges in the late eighties. “it’s the only way to get a space this size cheaply, and as we’re all old friends, the atmosphere is incredibly supportive,” explains Ann Carrington, who is the artist responsible for the horses, skeletons and more obviously ‘animalistic’ work.



STARS AND STRIPES : Patchwork American flags made of old jeans.

Carrington became something of a cult figure among recycled culture aficionados after fashion designer Paul Smith bought up half her MA sculpture show at London’s Royal College of Art in 1987. Her dogs made from hammers and llamas constructed from old school desks with boots for heads, had an instant appeal, while her articulated tin-can fish and oil-can cars and aeroplanes were put on display in Smith’s New York shop.

As a result of her show, several friends suggested she should visit the townships of South Africa, where communities earn a living from making toys and other objects from recycled materials. Her opportunity came in 1992, when she won a six-month Commonwealth Fellowship, which enables one artist from a Commonwealth country to ‘exchange’ lives with another. It took her to a village in Zimbabwe where the Shona tribe

specialises in stone carving. Having found a studio, she set about working with the available materials, but soon found she was more interested in photographing the children who, having no toys of their own, made playthings from recycling ‘rubbish’.

A grant from the London Arts Board in 1994 gave her a chance to return and collect much of the work she had photographed – the 6ft painted juggernauts, battered Ford estate and caravan – for an exhibition at Brixton’s 198 Gallery.

Since leaving college, Carrington has had several private commissions, including work for Issey Miyake and Levi Jeans. Her work for Levi’s includes huge maps of America made from recycled jeans, patchwork Stars and Stripes flags – ‘they’re like some strange colonial quilt’ – and Indian headdresses where each feather is a frayed seam.

‘Someone from the company saw an exhibition of mine, and gave me an allowance to come up with a number of ideas made from jeans,’ explains Carrington. Many of these, such as the 9ft wigwam (there was something satisfying about making an Indian home from “enemy” cowboy jeans’), are now on show in Levi’s stores around the country. But the most spectacular of her sculptures, the installation of dancing horses, forms the centrepiece of the exhibition, ‘Coca Bossa Nova’ at Wharf Road Studios.

The materials Carrington uses are in strong contrast to those employed by the other sculptors working at Wharf Road Studios. The muscular metal figures are by Robert Bryce Muir, a contemporary of Carrington’s at the Royal College; the burnt-out character sitting in one corner formed part of an ICA exhibition, ominously entitled ‘Snuffed’ by artist Simon Costin. Abstract paintings by Remo Avella are stacked up in an adjoining, low-ceilinged space, whilst two avant-garde theatre designers Simon Vincenzi and Jacqueline Gunn, have smaller rooms upstairs.

The artists come in each morning around 11 o’clock, and work until 7.30 or so. It’s tempting to think of them holding wild parties among the sculptures but, says Carrington, they just don’t have the time. Still, when the door is shut and everyone’s gone home, one can just imagine the horses, tin men and chair-leg skeletons having a surreal soiree of their own.



Ann Carrington’s Indian headdresses, above, with feathers made from frayed denim.